

Interview of Rex Larsen
By Richard Van Wagoner
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Richard: Interview with Rex Larsen at his home on the fifth of March, 1989. The topic is Mink ranching industry in Lehi.

Richard: Ok, I'll just start out by asking how your dad, Neil Larsen, was one of the pioneering mink ranchers in this area. Just talk a little about what it was like when he started up, what year he started, when he got his stock; that kind of thing.

Rex: Well he started in 1938, and we got the stock from Nordy Sabrinsky in American Fork. He had been in the business several years before then. At that time, it was more or less, just a hobby.

Rex: When it came to preparing our food, we had to have John Kuhni in Provo. He prepared and killed all the horsemeat for us. Then we would have Mr. Carpenter from Pleasant Grove, catch all the fish for the mink ranchers.

Rex: About the same time, there was Basil Dorton, the school teacher, who was also in the business. He went in the business shortly after we did. Frank Barnes was in the business for a while. They were the only three in business in Lehi until after the war.

Rex: After the war, it kind of started taking off and there were quite a few of them that got into the business after that. Right after the war, they formed a Fur Breeders Agriculture Cooperative that was a godsend to us. The Cooperative would grind our food and deliver it to us on a daily basis. They'd deliver it to the ranchers in an open truck. It wasn't refrigerated at that time, depending on the size of the ranch or how much food it purchased. The food came in gallon cans, five gallon cans or

fifty gallon cans depending on how much they purchased.

Rex: Some of the other ranchers in the early ages of Lehi were Pongg Dahl, and Maurice Dahl. They had a few and so did Millie Dean have mink in Lehi. Then it wasn't long until Albert Woolsey got into the business.

Rex: At the first stage of the game, it was more or less a hobby; just to have something to do as a hobby. Then it got to where it was a little more profitable and then it started getting larger and larger.

Rex: The Coop first started in 1939, that was basically for fox feed. There wasn't any mink in the State of Utah then. Now there's about fifteen mink ranchers in the Lehi area. They're all full-time mink ranchers. I guess Scott McLaughlin is the largest mink rancher in Lehi. He's the largest mink rancher in Lehi. He's the largest mink rancher in the State. The rest of us run all the way from 800 to 1500 females a ranch. On my ranch, I employ 2 full-time people and in the summertime I have 3 or 4 part-time help with us.

Richard: What is the full name of the Coop?

Rex: Fur Breeders Agricultural Cooperative. That is all owned by mink ranchers and they put them to that.

Richard: You own stock in that? Does it work as a stock corporation?

Rex: Yes, more or less similar to a stock corporation.

Richard: When you were grinding your own feed, before the coop, what did you feed the mink then?

Rex: Horsemeat and Carp out of Utah Lake. It also had carrots, cereal and lettuce. That's what it consisted of.

Richard: Wasn't it hard to find the food for them?

Rex: It was hard to find the horsemeat. At the time, we had a little trouble getting the horsemeat. But the fish was plentiful. We had plenty of fish, but you couldn't feed fish on a six or seven-day basis because the mink would be paralyzed if you filled them with fish.

Richard: In the early days, when you were pelting, were there people who would come around and grade them in those early days, or did you do your own grading?

Rex: In the early days, there were three auction houses: two auction houses in New York and one in Seattle. They came around and graded the mink for us. All the ranches would get together and we'd go from ranch to ranch. At that time there wasn't that many mink to grade. Finally, the ranches would get bigger and bigger and it would take too long to grade. They just quit doing it. That is when the best things had happened to the mink business as far as I am concerned because the rancher wasn't relying on someone to do his grading for him and he started doing his own. He could start picking out his good mink from his bad mink. It was a good thing, they quit it.

Rex: The pelting on them starts in November, usually right after Thanksgiving time and it takes most of the ranchers about until through the 15th of December. The blue mink, the light colored min, they prime up their pelts, ready to take earlier than the dark mink. In the early stages, they all put leather on the outside of their pelts and the fur was on the inside of the pelt.

Rex: Recently, in the last fifteen years, or in the last twenty years, they started going fur out, will all mutation pelts. When they started fur out, I was one of the first ones in the Country here to go fur out. My wife and I went to Europe, to see how they were doing it in Europe. When we came back home, we set up our operation of our own fur-out pelts. Boards were made to get our operation going. Then I had the auction man from Seattle come down, and he spent two or three days with us. He was kind of leery about the fur out operation. But it did take off, and now all

mutation mink in the United States, or practically the world, are all sold fur-out. The one exception is the dark mink. The reason they don't sell the dark mink fur-out is because the European people like it leather-out because they know that it is American mink. In Europe, they put their dark mink and every mink they produce there goes fur-out. So that's kind of the prestige to have a leather-out min and one that American mink.

Richard: After your graders come through and grade your mink for you, that determines which mink you're going to pelt, but is there a certain percentage that you keep for your breeding stock? How do you work that?

Rex: Well, when they're graded, every mink is caught by hand and brought under a light. In the early days we brought them outside to the artificial light, but now most ranchers use fluorescent lights that they can take right into the mink ranch. You don't have to have so many catchers to catch them. Two men can keep the grader going pretty good all day long. You keep out the very best mink out of your herd, and keep them for your breeders. You can only increase about 10-15 per cent of your mink a year. If you grow any faster than that, you'll lose the quality of the mink. You have to have good quality mink, now-a-days, to stay in business and make any money out of it, cause there are so damn many mink in the world these days that commercial mink is so hard to sell.

Richard: Talk a little bit about the different colors of the mink and their values.

Rex: When we first started in the mink, me and my father, in 1938, there were only dark mink. The dark mink was kind of a brown-black mink. It was shortly after that when the mutation mink popped out of the dark mink.

Richard: Were those mutations bred to mutate or were they natural mutations?

Rex: Well it was just an oddball that came out of the black mink. We'd just keep crossing them back and forth and then these darn genes started popping out. Now there is a sapphire, which is a blue mink. There is a blue-grey mink, and then

there's violet, and then there's a kind of white-colored mink. Then there's a pearl, which is a beige colored mink. Then we have the mahogany type mink and the demi-buff type mink. You can cross back and forth but it is not profitable to raise them anymore or to mess with them. Your basic colors now are dark mink. Dark has been the leading mink for many years in the mink business.

Richard: Do you try to raise a mixture of all the different types, or do you favor one particular color?

Rex: Well, there's a lot of ranchers that just raise dark mink, and dark mink only. There's a lot of them also, that will have 2, maybe 3 colors of one color of those, off on one year, they hope to be lucky and hit another color or so if they can. But you can't change colors over night. It takes a long time to change the color of a mink. To go light from a dark off into a mutation mink, you can't do that over one or two years. It takes a period of years to build up a quality herd of mink. So you've got to keep maybe two or three colors and ride the storm out.

Richard: Let's talk a little bit about the marketing of the pelts. First of all, what would the price range amongst all these different colors? What, for example would be the price range of the value of a male pelt, the larger pelt?

Rex: Well, that will vary from year to year; the price of them. I have seen times when males has brought more than females; by five to ten dollars. But in the last few years, the females have been bringing more that what male pelts have. The main reason for that is they're using the female pelts to make coats, and the leather on the females is much lighter than it is on the male coats. The female skins are quite shorter knap that that on the male mink. It is much sharper looking garment when it's made up. You can put all this back to where you want it. In November, after we get through pelting them, when they leave the ranch, they are shipped to auction. When they get to the auction house, they are sized, and they're colored and shaded; then they're bundled.

Rex: Before they auction them off, they go on show, and the buyers come in from

all over the world to look at the mink. They have a catalogue which shows a lot number of every bundle in it. So when they go in the auction room to bid on the mink, they actually bid on the lot number corresponds with the lot number on the number of the mink.

Richard: What are the variables, from year to year, that will affect the costs, or the value of the pelts?

Rex: Mainly overproduction. This past year, 1988, there were over 40 million mink produced worldwide. It's just a little more than they can actually consume. That will push the price of the pelt down, because the buyers are awful picky as to what they want. They know there are plenty of mink out in the market that they can pick out, and so they're very picky on what their take out of the market.

Richard: Is the market for fur coats, furs, as high as it's always been, or is that with the last few years you hear a lot of opposition with people wearing fur coats and that type of thing, does that affect the business at all?

Rex: It really hasn't affected the business we're kind of leery about letting people in on the ranch. Animal fur people are raising quite a bit of care about it. But it doesn't seem to raise or bother the price of the gardening or, the price of the pelts. One of our big problems is the value of the dollar worldwide.

Richard: Do you think that backlash might have been more with, like seal pelts, the way with that has a lot of publicity?

Rex: That's pretty much died down. We have a real problem now because there is a strong animal's rights movement going on all over the world, and it is very strong. They have lots and lots of money to buy, and they're going on to ranches and letting mink loose. They're burning stores where mink are found at. These activists are really causing a lot of problems, and that's really our big concern now.

Richard: Aside from fur coats, and stoles, and things like that, what are some of the other uses for mink pelts?

Rex: That's about the only thing they're used for, is for gardens, then back to what you say about the trouble they had with clubbing seals and that. I don't know, they've got a harvest of seals, there are so many of them. When they so-called club them, that's the only way they can harvest them. They've tried shooting them, and it won't kill them. They've tried sticking them, like they do a pig, and it doesn't work. But the skull on a seal is very thin, and they only take out the young seals that are not going to be used for breeding purposes.

Richard: When you're saving them, what is the ratio of males to females that you keep in your stock?

Rex: Most people keep maybe 1 to 5-one male to 5 females or one to 4 for breeding. Some of them won't work, and some are man and various problems that we have with them.

Richard: Do you ever experiment with the cross-breeding to get different colors and things yourself; or do you just, kind of, keep them all the same in the breed lines?

Rex: I've pretty much kept them all the same color. I did bring some mink in from Europe, that I crossed back and forth and produced the only pearl cross-type mink ever produced in the United States. But I got so many by-products out of it, that it wasn't quite profitable enough to raise and keep them going. But I do, breed them straight true colors.

Richard: Are you still expanding your business, or do you just maintain it, about the same number now?

Rex: We're just maintaining it about the same number. We have 3,150 females all around so, we're going to set right on that.

Richard: When you started with your dad, was there Von, or any other of the brothers that I didn't know about? Were they involved?

Rex: No there was me and my father, when we started for Marley Sabrisky. We made mink pelts for him for mink for pay. My brother never started them up until after he got out of school (high school), quite a bit later.

Richard: How many, before pelting, full-time people do you employ?

Rex: Before pelting, I employ just two full-time. I have one son working with me full-time and then I had another fellow full-time. My other son Lynn, has a few mink, and he helps me part-time. Then I use my grandson part time. Then when we get into pelting, when we're harvesting the mink, we have about six or eight people working-at least that's the full time people. Then when we start processing the pelts in the shop, when we have about 24 ladies who work for us. This is for a two week-fifteen day period.

Richard: Ho many mink do you usually process, like in November?

Rex: With 1300 females, we'll process maybe over 10,000 pelt plus. They take the carcasses, believe it or not, they go into by-products. The fat is used for various things-soaps, perfumes, etc. It is wasn't for the mink business in the United States, the by-product, we use to feed our mink, they would have a hard time getting rid of it. It'd have to be buried, because what we feed them is not human consumption stuff. So it's one good that that the mink business is going in the United States 'cause it gets rid of a lot of the by products otherwise we'd have nothing to dispose with it.

Richard: How's the community, how do you think Lehi would rank in terms of its' mink production statewide?

Rex: We're about 3rd largest in the state in mink production down here. Morgan is first. Morgan and the Coalville area, up that way would be first, and then if you took in Utah County, we'd be second in production.

Richard: Is it because it's colder weather up there, you get a better pelt, and so

there's more of an advisable area or something?

Rex: No, the weather does have a factor on it, but not that much. It is controlled by diet, to produce a good mink; the diet you feed them. They raise mink down in the southern states, but they don't get quite as good a mink as we have here. But, some of the best mink in the World have come out of the State of Utah.

Richard: What is in the Food mix now? It has a lot more enrichment than it did in the beginning; but what are the basic additives that they put in it?

Rex: Ohn we have a fortified cereal that goes into it. We feed condemned chickens and turkeys all fall. Cheese, cereals, they'll use soy meal, fish meal, and scrap fish that comes out of our plants. We own three fish plants on the west coast. After the fishes are flayed, they take the racks, they're ground up to go into the mink feed.

Richard: Is it delivered twice a day?

Rex: No, the feed is delivered on a daily basis with the exception of maybe the first of December, until the first of March when it's cold. It comes on an every-other-day basis. When it gets to the min ranchers, it's about 30 degrees. The mix is 30 degrees. It's very free of bacteria. The stuff has got to be pretty fresh to keep the bacteria kept down. So it's a fresh feed. The coop has a veterinarian that works with the mink ranchers on controlling the disease among the mink. They also have a nutritionist that works with them and helps formulate the diets, and regulates the protein, fat, and carbohydrates in the feed so it's a well balanced diet. We also have a laboratory of the fur-breeders too. So if the rancher has an outbreak of something on the ranch, he can take the mink in there and they can check it to see what it is, help them control anything like this that comes on the ranch.

Richard: Mink ranching is a very demanding business where you've to to take care of the animals every day. How do you get away from the business like on vacations?

Rex: Well it is hard especially in the summertime, when we have all of the young mink here on the ranch. But we can work it around so one man can go at a time and get away. It's a seven-day a week job. It takes ten, twelve hours a day in the summertime. The mating season starts the first part of March and will go clear through practically the whole month of March.

Rex: After we get our females mated, we use lights on them, artificial lights, which was no-no many years ago. But we use them now to control the gestation period, shorten their gestation period and have all the females well within a week of each other, even though they have been mated fifteen days apart, which brings all our work load all at once. When they start coming, you have to be with them all the time. It is not like it was when we had a few. A few years ago, they did not pay that much attention to them. We live right with them now, trying to save every one that we can save. Lights, if they're not used right, can foul up your herd. In the fall, when they go to prime and when the leather primes, it won't prime. And if you don't have a prime pelt, the leather not prime and you'll lose all the fur off of the pelt. A lot of people don't realize that.

Rex: If you turn the lights on in the winter months, before breeding season, it changes their cycle. Their cycle's all controlled by the light through their eyes. Then they'll come into their cycle and be gone and you'll never get them mated. So you have to be very careful when you're playing around with artificial lights.

Richard: Are there ever any diseases that would just sweep through and kill a lot of the crew; Is there ever a problem?

Rex: No really now we don't have that problem. But years ago, we had problems before we had vaccines. Distemper was the worst one. It is the same distemper that a dog has. But now we have vaccines for distemper, botulism, inneritis, and pseudis pneumonia. They are the four worst things that we've ever had. But we've been safe for a while. We haven't had anything come through now and wipe the herd out.

Richard: When do you vaccinate them? At what time of year?

Rex: We vaccinate the kits when they're about 10-12 weeks of age. Until that point they get their immunity from their mother and that's about the age. There have been ranchers that don't vaccinate, and they've got distemper in them, and it will, it'll wipe your herd right out. One rancher, I know, lost 90 per cent of his ranch because he never vaccinated them. But the coop has a policy that when you sign up at the coop, you have to vaccinate them. The reason for that is, if you get a botulism, which would come in the feed, and you went back and sued the Coop, if you didn't vaccinate you'd have no grounds to get any recovery from it.

Another disease that come out of it, is Aleutian Disease. When this first factor started it came out in Aleutian-type mink, which are Aleutian mink and sapphire mink. It's a blood disease. We don't know what causes it. We've done research on it all over the world, on Aleutian disease for the last twenty years that I know of, or longer. They cannot come up with a vaccine. They can't get the virus. It's a virus-type, they just can't get it isolated and work with it. This will wipe you out. That, right now is the worst thing we've got. You can control it, by blood test and they call it electrophoresis. You draw the blood from the mink in a tube and spin it down. Use a managing type to that we use and it goes into a cooker-type thing, electrophoresis thing will tell us what or they've got it or not.

But if a female or a male has got it, then we automatically kill that mink right them, disinfect and sterilize all the pens, and any place that mink has been on the ground. So it won't spread. This disease could stay dormant for two to three years before it will ever pop up in the herd. They have come up with now, they think there is four Aleutian disease viruses and you can bring mink from another ranch onto your ranch and if he's got two different viruses when those two viruses hit, it could go right through your herd. It usually hits you in the fall when you start losing a lot of mink. Just before they're ready to market the pelt. It affects the quality of the mink. They don't have any fur on them. They're a real low grade mink. It also knocks the production of your mink ranch down to where you don't get any

production. It's a very severe disease . But they've got it to where they can control it pretty good.

I had it here one time on my ranch quite bad. When you take your blood test you have to call the coop and set up a date to take the blood in, because they get so much blood in there its hard for them to handle it. Sometimes they have to send it out of state to get it done, so my wife and I , we went and set up our own lab. We have our own lab here where we can do our own work at our convenience that has really paid off for us.

Richard: You keep track of all of that type of thing? Do you have a computerized system for keeping track of all that.

Rex: I'm not putting it on a computer. I'm too old to go to that. In that stage of the game, though they are going to the computer's zone on the ranches. A lot of the younger fellows are going to computers. I think its going to be the coming thing. Even the way we do it, the mink are all numbered. They have a number given to them which keeps the sire, the dam, the dates they were bred, how many were in the litter. so that we know where every min is.

Richard: In the future, what types of changes do you see that may take place in minch ranching?

Rex: Well there probably will be from the way it used to be. Years ago even when you worked for my father, you watered with the bucket and then we finally went to watering with the hose and we'd feed them with the spoon. Now, I remember my father coming down here when he went out of the mink business.

I got one of the first feed machines to feed mink with. In this area, and he came down here and he said, "You can't feed mink with that thing." But if he was here today, he'd flip over in his grave. Everything's automatic. Our water systems are all automatic. They're either on a nipple or they're on a time-clock where it turns on and off automatic. We have three feeding machines where we can feed

15,000 min out here in two hours.

There are going to be changes in the fleshing machines, where we take the fat out of them. I had one of the first fleshing machines that came into the State of Utah. Since then there have been about four or five different types of machines, different models and I've had every one of them. We've just bought a new one this year. It is an automatic that takes one man to run it. We would do as much work on that one machine as we could with four people, so we've eliminated about four people by buying this machine. What they'll come up with next, I don't know. They've got machines they're experimenting with all the time.

Richard: Aside from Foxes and Chinchillas, are there any other animals in this area that have been raised for their furs.

Rex: There's not many Chinchillas anymore in this area, there are a few boys playing around with the Lynx cats. There's a few playing around with the Mardin type. But they're pretty hard to get them domesticated to where you can get production on them to make it a worthwhile job. They used to raise rex rabbits for a while in this area, but that is gone and they don't have those around anymore. Mink and fox are your basic ranch-raised type mink.

Richard: Did you ever think about raising foxes and did you ever want to get into that?

Rex: I have a few. I started a few up last fall.

Richard: Are they harder to raise than mink?

Rex: Well, you don't have to spend the time with them you just pair them up the way we do if we just pair them up, the way we do it. Just Pair them up and let them go Feed them once a day and water them and just let them go. I'm not going into foxes that big, It's just something to play with, to get rid of the excess feed that the mink didn't eat.

Richard: Is the Jordan River Ranch out there the biggest fox pelting area?

Rex: Yes it's the largest fox ranch.

Richard: How do you kill the foxes when you're pelting them?

Rex: You do it the same way with those as you do with the mink. You use gas, carbon monoxide. It's not a cruel way to do it. You just put them in the box and in the matter of about half a minute they're asleep.

Richard: It's just like a little gas chamber sort of?

Rex: Yeah!

Richard: What type of gas is it?

Rex: Carbon monoxide. It's the slickest way. We've done every way there was to kill them. This is the best way we've come up with.

Richard: Can you think of any other things we might want to put in this chapter? Do you want to add anything else?

Rex: We've had two ranchers in this area that decided they could mix their feed cheaper than what they could buy it through the coop. Jordan River out here has put in a mix plan. Just of him and his family and the other rancher and his family. It is an asset to the mink people that he does a good job with it.

Richard: Is the feed really expensive? Like how much per day, per mink would it cost?

Rex: It'll cost about--a lot of it will depend on production, the amount of production. It'll run around 13-17 dollars just for feed only. On a ranch my size

the time that we get it pelted from the time the pelt's brought to the auction house, it runs around 29 dollars to put it in the auction house. But the feed is the cheapest; It's the labor that's expensive. You other supplies and utilities you need to take all that into consideration. They are what is really expensive. Then it's hard to get good labor on a ranch. They just don't want to work on a farm.

Richard: I remember when I worked for you, just a week or two in the summer. I was working with your dad, but there was a problem then with someone was rustling some of your stock. Is that a common type of problem or, where they're worth a lot of money?

Rex: It's not too common we don't have too much of that. I've had a lot of that here where I've had my stock disappear but it's really not too bad.

Richard: Do you ensure some of the more valuable breeding stock?

Rex: No.

Richard: Not against any kind of natural disasters or anything?

Rex: No, you just take a chance and live with it. When we pelt them they're insured from the time we slaughter them, we might say from that day until they are sold. We take insurance on the pelt. As far as raising the animal, I know of few people who carry any insurance.

Richard: Do most of the wild mink you see here have they just escaped from ranches? or is there a natural mink?

Rex: Yes, there's a wild mink. Around this area here, the wild mink all come out of Alaska. The mink in this area through here that's one the Jordan River or the Utah Lake that's on the shorelines are just mink that have escaped from the ranches. They're just a domestic animal that's got out. same way with foxes, there's foxes running around here, too. They've escaped from these guys that's got foxes.

Richard: How big do the foxes get?

Rex: Oh they get like a dog, pretty good size.

Richard: Are they white? What color are they?

Rex: Oh they're getting it now so there as many colors in foxes as there are in mink. There's the silver fox, and the blue fox, the crystal Beth. There's quite a few colors of them.

Richard: Do they eat the same food as the mink?

Rex: Yes, but their diet should be a little different. They don't eat quite as much fat as the mink does, but basically it's the same thing.

Richard: How many kits do they have?

Rex: The blue fox will have a litter just like a dog. Ten twelve thirteen. The Silver fox mainly have three or four. They're a very nervous type animal. If they get too nervous they'll just kill the whole litter.

Richard: How long does it take than to mature?

Rex: They're born in May and they're ready to kill at the end of December.

